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Arms route to contras described

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WASHINGTON — Boeing 707 cargo jets that ferried Iran-bound American weapons to the Middle East earlier this year subsequently flew to Central America laden with Soviet-made arms for the Nicaraguan contras, according to rebel sources.

After delivering U.S. arms to Israel at the behest of National Security Council officials, cargo jets from Southern Air Transport of Miami on at least one occasion flew to Lisbon, Portugal — a major arms market — and took aboard AK-47 rifles, grenades and other arms, which they delivered to Central America, according to contra sources.

The rebels said they had learned of the arms route in conversations with their American contacts.

In addition, government records show three other Lisbon-to-Central America flights by Southern Air 707s. And one rebel official said he believed the flight costs for all four flights bearing contra arms were financed by the \$10 million to \$30 million that Attorney General Edwin Meese had said was generated by the U.S. arms sales to Iran.

The arms-delivery pattern as described by the contra sources would have reduced the transport costs of the contra arms procurement project considerably by positioning U.S.-based aircraft across the Atlantic at no extra cost, making them available for return flights.

"That is how the system worked," one of the rebel sources said. "It was more economical that way, rather than having different flights carry shipments to Iran and others carrying shipments for us."

Documents filed by Southern Air with the U.S. Transportation Department appear to corroborate the rebel accounts. They show the carrier's Boeing 707s ferrying about 225 tons of cargo out of Lisbon to Guatemala City's airfield, Honduras' Palmerola air force base and San Salvador's Ilopango air base during the first half of 1986.

The documents do not establish that the cargo was arms or that it was bound for the contras. But Lisbon was a major arms marketplace for the contras, and U.S.-manned planes operated out of Ilopango, air-dropping weapons and other supplies to rebel units inside Nicaragua from June until Oct. 5, when one of the supply planes was shot down.

Eugene Hasenfus, a cargo handler who survived the crash and was captured by the Sandinistas a day later, has estimated the total supplies dropped into Nicaragua at less than 100 tons.

The four Southern Air flights to Israel and Iran the administration has described were authorized Jan. 17 by President Reagan and likely were financed by U.S. government funds. How Southern Air's return flights from Europe — laden with arms for the contras — were financed remains unclear.

If U.S. funds paid for the return flights, "that would be a clear violation of the law," which at the time barred direct or indirect government support for the contras, a U.S. official who monitors rebel affairs said yesterday.

White House spokesman Don Mathes said yesterday that comment on all matters relating to arms shipments to Iran and the contra rebels must wait until pending legal investigations were completed.

Southern Air was once owned by the CIA and several of its present officers were associated with past CIA projects. Southern Air spokesman William Kress declined to comment yesterday, citing the "sensitivity" of the issue.

According to administration officials, Southern Air 707s transported U.S.-made TOW anti-tank and Hawk anti-aircraft missiles and other military materiel and equipment from Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, to Tel Aviv and on to Tehran in flights during February, May, August and October.

A Southern Air flight from Tel Aviv to Tehran May 28 carried former national security adviser Robert C. McFarlane and Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, who sought to discuss with Iranian officials the U.S. hostages held in Lebanon.

A routine Transportation Department report filed by Southern Air on its charter operations in May details two 707 flights from Kelly Air Force Base to Tel Aviv, carrying 45 tons of cargo per flight. The next May listing in the same report shows two 707 flights from Lisbon to San Salvador's Ilopango carrying 45 tons of cargo each.

The later May listings closely mirror the description by rebel sources of at least some of the transatlantic flights. They said that after delivering U.S. weapons to Tehran via Israel, the two 707s returned to Portugal to load Soviet-made arms from

Israeli-held stocks captured in Lebanon. From Lisbon the Southern Air planes crossed the Atlantic to airports in Central America, according to the rebel account.

Southern Air's reports to the Transportation Department for earlier months reflect a similar pattern.

In February, Southern Air 707s twice carried 45 tons of cargo from Kelly Air Force Base to Tel Aviv, the reports indicate. The following month, a Southern 707 airlifted 45 tons of cargo from Lisbon to an airfield designated as "PLA."

International airfield codes identify PLA as Planadas, Colombia. But a congressional aide who has studied numerous Southern Air flight reports for its Military Airlift Command contracts said Southern routinely designates Honduras' Palmerola air force base as "PLA."

Palmerola, west of Tegucigalpa, is the Honduran Air Force's principal airfield and serves as headquarters for nearly 1,000 U.S. soldiers detached to U.S. Joint Task Force Bravo, a semi-permanent installation that coordinates continuing U.S. military maneuvers in Honduras.

Contra supplies have occasionally passed through Palmerola in the past, according to Honduran sources, but Southern Air's records are the first indication that contra supplies involved in the present scandal have passed through the air base.

In March, Southern Air L100 planes appear to have made two cargo flights from Palmerola to Ilopango.

Southern Air's reports for April show a 707 flight from Lisbon to an airport designated "YSV." International airport codes designate a Newfoundland airport as "YSV." But a pilot who participated in the contra supply network identified those letters as the designation for Ilopango, and flight logs captured when Sandinista soldiers shot down the Ilopango-based plane on Oct. 5 used the same designation for Ilopango.

Rebel officials have referred in the past to arms purchases in Lisbon. And according to the Middle East Policy Survey, a Mideast affairs journal, North traveled to Lisbon in the summer of 1985 on an arms-supply mission for the contras. The article, published last month, said North talked with Israeli arms dealers about shipping weapons to Iran.

The arms recovered from the wreckage of Hasenfus' C-123 included AK-47 and AKM rifles, RPG-7 grenades, and more than 50,000 rounds of ammunition. Sandinista officials said the impeccable condition of some of the weapons indicated that they had come straight from a factory and had probably been provided by a government.

A rebel source said yesterday that the weapons acquired with the Iran profits had been drawn from stocks smuggled from an East-bloc country as well as from supplies captured in Lebanon during the 1982 invasion.